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The Christian Revolution.

1: Liberty

Michael Jensen

I

I have entitled this series of three pieces *The Christian Revolution: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. What I would like to do is to try to recapture for Christianity these foundational political concepts by giving a theological account of them. In fact, I would like boldly to claim that without God, there can be no true liberty, equality or fraternity for human beings.

Why does this matter? It is more than just asking us to consider carefully who we vote for. There are three reasons that this is an important study. First, to consider the concepts of politics is to consider the very nature of authority in human affairs and the very shape of human life together. The gospel itself makes a political statement—‘Jesus is Lord’—which conditions everything a Christian will think about politics, or ought to. Secondly, political ideas have tremendous power to shape the way millions of human beings think and live. For example, the idea of human rights is a philosophical notion endorsed not just by governments but also by people in the street who consider themselves to have ‘inherent’ and ‘inalienable’ ‘rights’.

A third reason is historical: for more than a thousand years, power and authority *were* interpreted from a Christian point of view, rightly or wrongly. But we have reached a moment in the history of what we loosely call ‘the west’ when a whole culture has fairly deliberately pulled away from its roots in the soil of Christianity, and has determined to go it alone. Religious talk has been bracketed out of the public domain: for example, when bishops are shouted down by politicians and told to stick to talking about God within the walls of their cathedrals; or when a Prime Minister of the United Kingdom keeps his faith hidden because religious people are considered ‘nutters’ by the British people.

But this is an act of colossal cultural amnesia: what the secularisers forget is that the foundational concepts of secular politics— notions like freedom, equality and the brotherhood of man—have their origins in Christian theology,

where they are established in relation to the sovereign Lord and his future eternal rule. Instead, we sing the secular hymn of John Lennon: imagine a world with no religion, no hell below us, above us only sky, a brotherhood of man, a borderless globe and a godless heaven. However, recent debates in Australia about ‘values’ in education reveals that for many people secularism tastes very dry on the tongue; and there is a faint but still lingering memory that, despite their flaws, the churches had something that we are now missing. The secularization of authority and power began in the Enlightenment, which found its political fulfillment in the revolutions of France and the United States. We take as our slogan their slogan: *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite*; and imagine for a minute that we can recapture them for the gospel from which they sprang. In doing so, we will be right in the front lines of a war to the death over what it means to be, and to lives as, a human being.

II

Consider, if you will, the zoo. The zoo of today has changed radically from the zoo of my childhood. Sydney’s Taronga Zoo used to be a landscape of alternating pits and cages, a territory of walls and iron bars. The animals paced up and down, going mad with boredom. I vividly remember visiting the female elephant who swung backwards and forwards with a gigantic tic: something about being in the zoo had destroyed her soul. Today, at huge cost, the zoo has ‘enclosures’ and ‘displays’, but no cages and pits, in an attempt to give the impression of nature and freedom. Why? Because visitors to zoos couldn’t stomach what a previous generation could. We find going to zoos with animals in cages nauseating because we can’t imagine anything worse than living in a cage ourselves. After all, how do we punish criminals? By removing the most precious thing they have: their liberty.

The meta-narrative of political liberalism is of course a tale of progressive emancipation—most particularly in terms of individual freedom. Much was expected of modernity in this regard; and the goal of human life has become supremely the quest for personal freedom. Individual autonomy is the central feature of the liberal political vision. For liberal political theory, freedom is the condition most natural to human beings. According to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* of 26th August 1789, at the dawn of the French Revolution, ‘Men are born and remain free’. This liberty is inalienable, basic and profound. The purpose of human being must be to aspire to the liberty that is our

birthright. Kant described freedom as ‘the only original right belonging to every man by virtue of his humanity’.¹

It is a powerful myth: an idea that evokes the glorious stories of the overthrow of tyrants and empires, the fights against slavery and colonialism, and the pursuit of the rights of women and workers. However, by insisting on a supposedly neutral public discourse, secular western liberalism has allowed the only ‘values’ discourse left—economics—to determine what freedom should mean. Individual freedom has now been reduced to sex-and-shopping: the unbridled consumption of people and things, the quest for the perfect, ziplines orgasm and the best pair of shoes. It is a freedom of desire. We, as Walter Truett Anderson has pointed out, are now what we consume.²

There is a further aspect of the secular vision of freedom that often lies hidden: that the freedom of the one too often comes at the expense of the freedom of others. In other words, securing our personal liberties has meant the enslavement of others. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes—

What appears as globalisation for some means localisation for others; signalling a new freedom for some, upon many others it descends as an uninvited and cruel fate. Mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among coveted values—and the freedom to move...fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern times.³

The cry of freedom of western society conceals a will to power, as Michel Foucault argued. The project of freedom has been a project of exploitative domination.

This happens in two ways. First, the First World has grown fat on the growing impoverishment of the Third World.⁴ The sports-shoe swoosh means self-expression, exhilarating athleticism and success to the West; but it means virtual slavery to the children who make footwear for a pittance. Second, our endless summer of consumption cannot be sustained by the finite resources of the earth without some encroachment of a planetary winter.⁵ Modern civilization, which proclaims its mastery of nature via science and technology, forgets that it is dependent on nature for survival.⁶ Without reference to God, human freedom quite readily becomes distorted. Richard Bauckham notes the

consequences of an absolute freedom—‘Centrally at issue in the widely perceived crisis in modernity that characterizes the beginning of the twenty-first century are the meaning and value of human freedom’.⁷

A surfeit of freedom has led human beings to become ‘atomised’ (to use the title of Michel Houellebecq’s novel of the failure of freedom):⁸ the excesses of the sexual revolution by fracturing the family removed the last social barrier protecting the individual from the market. With individual freedom has come the freedom to be alone. This is of course the great communitarian charge against liberalism: that it has, by misdirecting human aspirations, merely fostered painful human isolation.

We can see that to hold unqualified freedom as the cardinal virtue is deeply troublesome in the results that it produces. Yet there is an even deeper problem: to insist that a person is only truly free when every aspect of life becomes a matter of choice between available alternatives is really to understand freedom as a rejection of finiteness.⁹ Choice is what makes us believe we are gods. Ultimate freedom is, so we dream, the path to immortality. It is a deep denial of death.

The pilgrimage for freedom—the metanarrative of emancipation—that liberalism represents is at heart a quest for freedom from God. The theological judgement inherent in the post-Enlightenment pursuit of freedom is that ‘a God standing over against us in judgement and grace is an offence to independence and freedom’.¹⁰ In his book *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, Richard Bauckham argues convincingly that the secular concept of freedom is a faint shadow of the Christian one, denuded of the very theological component that gives it coherence.¹¹ As we shall see, a biblical and theological account of human freedom has a greater explanatory power than the alternatives offered by secular liberalism.

III

The absolute freedom of God is a freedom appropriate to his divine nature; and yet he freely exercises his freedom in love for his creatures.¹² The love that exists within the Trinity means that God has no necessity for creating the world other than his free desire to do so. ‘God’s being as He who lives and loves is being in freedom.’¹³ Yet out of love for his Son he created the world for him

(Heb. 1:2-4).¹⁴ T. F. Torrance makes a good deal of this motif, ‘...it is this doctrine of the freedom of creation contingent upon the freedom of God with liberated Christian thought from the tyranny of fate, necessity and determinism...’.¹⁵

In the Priestly account of Genesis 1, the Creator is portrayed as creating in absolute, effortless freedom. Nothing hinders the ‘absolute effortlessness of the divine action’.¹⁶ This radical self-sufficiency of God has prompted Christian dogma, in the face of almost all philosophies, to posit a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as a profound expression of the order of the relationship between God and his creation: it is utterly dependent on him, but he not at all on it. This doctrine runs persistently throughout Christian history, from Irenaeus,¹⁷ to the Fourth Lateran Council (1214), Calvin¹⁸ and beyond.

There is, however, a strong disanalogy between divine and human freedom. From the Yahwist’s version in Genesis 2, the Bible does not see the freedom of human beings in moral terms. Principally they were given a freedom for a task as the agents of God in the world: to bring creation to its potential and offer it back to its creator as a sacrifice of praise. Their freedom was a relative freedom: a freedom relative to the absolute freedom of the Creator God who in his freedom chose to create the heavens and the earth. This is intriguing: out of his sovereign freedom, the Lord God chose to make space for human beings to exercise *their* freedom.

We see this in a twofold manner. First, it is that alongside the prohibitive command of *Yhwh* against eating from the one tree comes a summons to eat of the many trees that are not restricted (2:16-17). Second, God brings the animals to Adam ‘to see what he would name them’ (Gen. 2:19-20): presumably because God would like to know! This is an invitation to freedom. The Creator deity remarkably enters into the personal realm in response to his creature. To name something is a remarkable privilege: it means being allowed the responsibility of seeing into the essence of things and giving a label to it. ‘[A]nd whatever Adam called the animal, that was its name’ (Gen. 2:19). Adam and Eve were also freed for their task of tilling and keeping the ground—of so ordering the garden that it flourished and produced (Gen. 2:15). They were to exercise freedom not in domination but in tender dominion: realizing the potential latent in the good-but-not-yet-perfected world in which they had been placed. And it

seemed entirely right for Cain and Abel to return with the produce of their efforts and offer them back as a sacrifice to God, even after the Fall (Gen. 4:2-5).

Human beings in this primal state were also free to enjoy all the rich goodness of the creation. They were free to eat of any tree in the garden, in any order, or not at all. They were also freed for each other: no longer lonely, open in their nakedness to relish the unity of their flesh, and to share the task of filling the creation with people. Human freedom was always social—‘...none of us are truly the particular persons we are created to be except in love and fellowship with our neighbour’.¹⁹

However, it was a freedom that was always limited. They were limited of course by their physiology—they were like the animals, made of the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:17). They could only be in one place at a time. Unlike the one who made them, they could only create out of the materials he had given them. Nevertheless, knowing their limitations was the essential ground of their freedom. Their liberty was of course limited in another important way: they were not free to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warns them as much as commands them: do not eat of it, for you will surely die if you do (Gen. 2:16-17).

The decision of Adam and Eve to eat this fruit was not a march for freedom but a choice for chains. With the fall came new limits on human freedom. The creation has been ‘subjected to futility’, as Paul puts it (Rom. 8:20-21). The earth no longer yields so readily to our touch. Human relationships are riddled with shame and marked by the abusive domination of male over female.

At the ultimate boundary on human freedom, the final crushing blow to our egotism, is death. Despite our fantasies, men and women cannot break free of the gravity of death. We may go gentle into that dark night, or even rage against the dying of the light: our destiny is unchanged. Death is the termination of all choices. And yet, the Yahwist does not see death as God’s intended destiny for humankind: the return of Adam to the dust is a consequence of his own choice for defiance of the creator of life (Gen. 3:19).

Furthermore, people are not free to change. The human self has lost the capacity to realise the potential within itself for doing what it was made to do.

We are bound to the flesh, sold as slaves to sin, not even able to do the good we want to do (Rom. 7:7-25). No amount of self-help can help. It did no good, in the sweep of biblical history, to hold out the law as a strategy for freedom: the law pointed to Israel's utter dependence on Yhwh rather than their self-determination by an act of the collective will.²⁰

The true liberation of men and women begins with the freedom of the Son of God. How did the Son of God exercise his sovereign freedom? By voluntarily submitting to the restrictions and indignities of human flesh: living in a family, having a tongue and lips to learn a human language, having the need to sleep and to eat, flowing with hormones and blood; to face even the possibility of death. As a man, he exercised the freedom of true human being: authority without domination, care without exploitation, offering in his own body a sacrifice of praise to the creator. He, in his absolute liberty, *emptied* himself and in humility went to the cross (Phil. 2:5ff), there to bear the shame of all, to freely give his life a ransom for many: not to demand the servitude of others but to embrace slavery *for* others. Mark 10:45 is the *locus classicus*: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' His servitude meant the emancipation of those in bondage to sin and death.²¹

The announcement of the arrival of the Messiah is addressed to Israel under Roman occupation, politically oppressed and still in the state of spiritual exile. This is what Simeon recognises in the infant Jesus—the Isaianic consolation of Israel (Luke 2:23-35). The power of this metaphor lies in the memory of the slave experience in Egypt and the miraculous liberation that only came by a mighty divine power. It narrates the universal human story in terms of Israel's history. It emphasizes the helplessness of the general human predicament. The Lord's Supper replaces the Passover as the commemoration of redemption.

'Redemption' becomes one of the key metaphors for explaining Christ's work on the cross. *λυτρον* and *απολυτροσις* are used in a number of vital passages in the New Testament (Mark 10:45, Rom. 3:24, 1 Cor. 1:30, Gal. 4:4-5, Eph. 1:7, 1 Tim. 2:6, Titus 2:14). The emphasis of this word is on the cost of the believer's redemption. A second group of words is even more obviously drawn from the world of commerce: *αγοραζω/εξαγοραζω* (1 Cor. 6:19, 20; 7:22, 23). Here the emphasis is on the change of ownership that is a result of the purchase or payment of a ransom: the buying of someone's freedom. Jesus

himself spoke of his own death as ‘a ransom for many’ in Mark 10:45 (Matt. 20:28). He used the word *λυτρον*, which is used 140 times in the LXX and carries the significance of deliverance from bondage by payment or offering. The proclamation of ‘release to the captives’ (Luke 4:18) had to do not just with the political condition of the people, but also to do with the problem of sin.

By faith then comes true freedom to the people of God: release from the bleak destiny of sin and death, into new life as the children of God. We turn to perhaps the greatest passage on freedom in the Bible—Galatians 4–5. What Paul explains is that belonging to Christ is not slavery to law or to religious observance but freedom to love. ‘For freedom Christ has set us free’ (5:1)—in other words, for the purpose of embracing the freedom we were made for as God’s creatures, but lost through sin, we were set free from sin, condemnation and death by Christ. The people of God are not a community framed by law, but moulded by the freedom of faith.²²

Somehow, though, the human person grows to love her cages: it was hard for the Galatians to accept they had been released; and so they were tempted by the Judaizers. It was easier to imagine staying in the apparent safety of the law—like the long-term inmate who commits a crime so he will be put back in prison where there are at least regular meals. Far more risky is the life of freedom, which demands the use of the imaginative powers of the person to love. Even circumcision seemed easier. Paul says in Galatians 5:13-14—

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole commandment is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’.

At the core of the Christian life, then, is a freedom of the Spirit, a freedom that like the freedom of the Father and the Son, is surprisingly exercised in the costly and loving service of others.

IV

Luther explained the paradox of Christian freedom as ‘A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian is the most dutiful servant of

all, and subject to all'.²³ Human freedom as conceived by Christian theology is superior to the hubristic secular version in that it recognises the limits of creaturely existence and directs it to a purpose; and turns the subject away from self-advancement and towards the service of others. By comparison, the secular liberal myth of progressive human emancipation from authorities—such as and indeed especially God—produces outcomes that are problematic for human society. This is, at least in part, because the freedom of the one is not by any means the liberation of the other.

This understanding of freedom teaches us a great deal about how we should address the world. It tells us that true freedom does not come from loosing the ties that bind us to others, but from embracing the tasks that God made us for in the first place: the ordering, filling and naming of the created order in advance of its transformation. It tells us that true emancipation is impossible without transformation: without the Spirit of God there is no liberty, not truly. We must stand for people's freedom to serve God as they were made to do: to hear the voice of God and respond to it. Necessarily then, many of our aims will overlap with the kinds of liberal governments that support the freedom of the individual and make it possible for the individual to exercise these freedoms in civic duty. Paul says that just government is part of God's work in this world (Rom. 13). Working for the freedom of people under just government is surely a work with which he is pleased. The fight against slavery led by Christians in the nineteenth century was surely a fulfillment of their calling to use their freedom to serve God as the served others. God's people in our time have no less a call.

But we must also say to the world that the freedom to which it aspires—an individual self-sufficiency—is neither possible nor good. Freedom as an ultimate aspiration results in disaster. It is not by the relentless drive to freedom that we human beings find ourselves: human beings need God. The secular self is on its own: the Christian self is formed by intimacy with God within the Christian community. While the secular world is trying to be free of all talk about God, the churches will insist that to talk of freedom without God is meaningless.

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ENDNOTES

1. I. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, quoted in Bernd Wannewetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p. 180.
2. Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).
3. Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalisation: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 2, quoted in Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 215.
4. For a contemporary example, see the figures from the UNDP's Human Development Report 1999 cited by C. T. Kurien, "Globalization: An Economist's Perspective," in *Public Theology for the 21st Century : Essays in Honour of Duncan B. Forrester*, ed. Duncan B. Forrester, William Storrar, and Andrew Morton (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 206-7.
5. Bauckham uses the motor car as a symbol (though it is more than a symbol) for the western desire for freedom that is degrading the environment and even self-destructive. Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, p. 37.
6. Jürgen Moltmann, "Theology in the Project of the Modern World," in *The Crisis of Modernity and the Christian Self-Theology, Christian Learning, and the Christian Self*, ed. M.Volf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 12-3.
7. Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, p. 178.
8. Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Heinemann, 1999).
9. Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, p. 189.
10. Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 37.
11. Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*.
12. Michael P. Jensen, "The Gospel of Creation," *Reformed Theological Review* 59, no. 3 (2000): 139-40.
13. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), II.i.301.
14. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.i.51.
15. Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: OUP, 1981), p. 4.
16. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), p. 162.
17. Against the Heretics, II.1.i
18. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), I.xiv.20.

19. Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being—Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (London: SCM Press, 2002), p. 105.
20. See Paul's use of the παιδαγωγός ('disciplinarian') metaphor in Galatians 3:24.
21. The Gethsemane story reflects on the crucial moment of free submission to the will of the Father by the Son (Mark 14:32-44).
22. Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia—a Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 386-7.
23. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Martin Luther—Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 53. (WA VII, 21-22; LW XXI, 344).

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